RELIGION

Exorcist & Energumen

In St. Anthony's Monastery of the Capuchin Friars at Marathon, Wis. last week, a wise and white-haired monk named Rev. Theophilus Riesinger went about his daily orisons and meditations, indifferent to the fact that he was being widely publicized among U. S. Catholics as a potent and mystic exorcist of demons. Publicizers were the *Religious Bulletin* of the University of Notre Dame, and the Catholic *Register* of Denver, whose 300,000 subscribers last fortnight read the following story condensed from a pamphlet called *Begone Satan!*

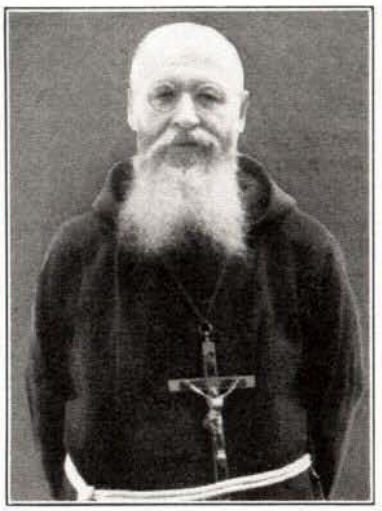
In 1928, a certain 40-year-old woman was taken first to a church, then to a Franciscan convent in Earling, Iowa. Apparently an energumen, she had exhibited symptoms of diabolical possession for a dozen years: she could not pray, take communion or even pronounce the name of Christ. Doctors had examined her, found her neither mentally nor physically abnormal. With the approval of the Bishop of Des Moines, the woman was made ready for exorcism by learned Father Theophilus, who upon 19 prior occasions had successfully made use of the Church's ancient rite, canonically available to all priests, for casting out devils.

Strong-armed nuns bound her, placed her upon a bed. But soon as Father Theophilus began the long series of prayers and commands to the devils to depart, "with lightning speed the possessed dislodged herself from the bed and the hands of protectors, and her body, carried through the air, landed high above the door of the room and clung to the wall with catlike grips." It was necessary to pull her down by force.

The demons in the energumen readily identified themselves. One was Judas. Another was the woman's dead father, named Jacob, who said he was damned for attempting unsuccessfully to induce her to commit incest with him. A third was Mina, the dead man's concubine, who said she had "murdered four little ones." Finally there were Beelzebub and hordes of imps who seemed to leave and reenter the energumen's body. The voices of all the demons issued from her mouth, with varying intonation, in English, German and Latin.

With the convent room full of noise and confusion, nuns and the local priests were obliged at times to leave it to rest. But the bespectacled old German-born Capuchin never stopped exorcising. For protection Father Theophilus, by special permission, wore a pyx containing the Blessed Sacrament. "Horrible excrements, obviously preternatural in their volume and filth, were ejected by the possessed woman, as the devils endeavored to hit the Blessed Sacrament (although they always missed It)." When the priest approached with a relic of the True Cross concealed under his cassock, there were howls: "I cannot bear that! Oh, it is tormenting! It is unbearable!" The possessed recoiled at the mention of St. Michael the Archangel, protested at a relic of the Little Flower, cried "That burns, that scorches!" when holy water was sprinkled. A prayer to Mary the Immaculate Conception "caused a bloating of the woman's body." The woman appeared emaciated at times, her face fiery red at others, her lips swollen to the size of hands, her abdomen so hard at one time that it bent the iron bedstead to the floor. Wise old Father Theophilus, who said he knew the energumen would recover, had to dissuade the others from having last rites given her.

In his surplice and violet stole, Father Theophilus repeated the prayers of the



FATHER THEOPHILUS
. . . wrestled with Iowa devils.

Church and loosed all the forces of the Lord at the devils day after day for 23 days. Finally, the Iowa woman smiled and for the first time in twelve years said: "My Jesus, mercy! Praised be Jesus Christ!"

The story of the Earling exorcism, *Begone Satan!*, was written in German by a Rev. Carl Vögel, translated by a Benedictine named Rev. Celestine Kapsner, published at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn. with the official imprimatur of Bishop Joseph F. Busch of St. Cloud and the *Nihil Obstat* of Monsignor John P. Durham. Hence it was presumed not to err in faith or morals. The Denver *Register*, whose editor, Monsignor Matthew J. W. Smith, splashed it on the front page of his weekly, was deluged with letters.

Last week Monsignor Smith found postscripts in order. To readers who seemed to be worrying lest they become diabolically possessed, he soothingly remarked that possession is not at all common. To Catholics who believed that such publicity would harm the Church, he offered some theology. The facts of possession and exorcism are part of Catholic dogma. But no Catholic is obliged to believe in any particular account of a case of diabolical possession outside of those recounted in Scripture—such as Jesus casting seven devils out of Mary Magdalen (Mark, 16:9) and exorcising devils out of a man called Legion into swine (Luke, 8:27).

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